

Outgunned contras keeping a low profile

By Vincent J. Schodolski
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SANTO DOMINGO, Nicaragua—When a band of rebels attacked this shabby town in late November, their raid appeared to be going smoothly until the nearby hills began to swarm with the army's newest and most potent anti-insurgency weapon, Soviet-made combat Mi-24 helicopters.

These heavily armed and highly maneuverable helicopters, combined with political and logistical factors, appear to have seriously limited the military effectiveness of the U.S.-financed guerrillas known as contras. Nicaraguan government sources

and Western intelligence analysts say rebel attacks have been few in number, mainly very small operations and have had only limited impact.

"It is small and sporadic," one Western intelligence source said of contra military activity.

This situation appeared unchanged despite last week's confirmation by the Nicaraguan government that the contras used a SAM-7 to shoot down a Soviet-made Mi-8 helicopter 165 miles north of Managua near the town of Mulukuku.

The incident showed that the contras were capable of effectively using the SAM-7s. However, the fact that they brought down an Mi-8, a

smaller, slower and less heavily armored helicopter than the Mi-24, lessened the impact, observers said.

The Sandinista government, charging that the CIA had supplied the contras with surface-to-air missiles, recalled its U.S. ambassador, Carlos Runneman, in protest. And the Nicaraguan mission to the United Nations asked for a meeting of the Security Council.

In Washington, Secretary of State George Shultz said the Reagan administration soon may ask Congress to resume direct military aid to the contras, which now is prohibited, in response to "incontrovertible evidence" of growing Cuban and Soviet involvement in the fighting. Shultz

denied the U.S. was giving the contras SAM-7s and said the rebels probably obtained them on the international arms market.

Observers noted that the downing of the Soviet Mi-8 helicopter did not indicate any dramatic change in the rebel efforts. However, they said it would be important to see if the contras are able to sustain this kind of activity.

Leaders of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force [FDN], the main rebel group, confirmed that the scope of their activity has been limited but claimed it was part of their present strategy. They admitted, however,

that the Soviet Mi-24 helicopters and delays in securing sufficient supplies have hampered their operations.

The Sandinista army, according to various sources, has made significant progress during the last six months in coordinating antirebel activities. The sources, both Nicaraguan and Western analysts, said the army was showing considerable skill in geographically containing the contras, intercepting their communications and responding quickly once an attack was underway.

Nicaragua obtained at least six Mi-24s—used by the Soviets with great success against rebel forces in Afghanistan—one year ago but it was not until August that they were first used in combat in Nicaragua. Western intelligence sources doubt that Nicaraguan pilots are flying the combat missions and suggest that Cuban, or perhaps East European pilots are involved.

"They [the pilots] are doing too well for them to be Nicaraguans," one source said.

The attack on Santo Domingo in late November appeared to demonstrate the Sandinista government's new effectiveness.

According to residents of the town 100 miles northeast of Managua, the raid began about 8:30 a.m. when the contras started firing mortars at a grain silo. The residents said a few contras were able to penetrate the town and engage the limited number of Sandinista troops there in small arms clashes.

However, townspeople said that within an hour, helicopters and aircraft were flying over the town, dropping small bombs and strafing the countryside with rocket and machine gun fire. The contras,

they said, withdrew in some disarray.

In all, about 60 contras were killed, according to the Defense Ministry. While no casualty figures were released on Sandinista losses, residents of Santo Domingo said they appeared to be small.

"We realize that they are better coordinated in their efforts," said Adolfo Calero Portocarrero, political leader of the FDN and one of the three top officials of the recently formed United Nicaraguan Opposition [UNO].

"In Santo Domingo we had a successful operation, very clean," he said. "And then the Hinds [Mi-24s] came and we encountered great difficulty."

Calero said that the single most important piece of military equipment his forces need now is antiaircraft missiles to combat the Mi-24s. The contras have some Soviet SAM-7 missiles, but Calero said these have not yet been used against the Mi-24s because none of the rebel units attacked by the helicopters had the weapons with

them. He also admitted that the missiles are extremely expensive.

The contras' attack on Santo Domingo last month was the only serious one the rebels have conducted since August when they raided and briefly held the town of La Trinidad on the Pan American Highway. That assault, along with another about the same time on the town of Cuapas, was thought to have been the start of a contra offensive.

But the offensive never materialized. In fact, despite the renewal of \$27 million in non-lethal "humanitarian" aid approved by Congress and additional \$25 million in donations from private individuals in the U.S. and from other foreign sources, the main attacks carried out between August and late November were ambushes on Sandinista military convoys.

Asked about the low level of rebel military activity, Calero said the frequency and the scale of the attacks were in line with present tactics. He said FDN troops were picking battles carefully and aimed them at harassing the Sandinistas more than scoring dramatic victories. He called the present level of fighting "sufficient."

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Nicaraguan and Western intelligence sources said the low level of contra military activity was not the result of a tactical decision by the rebels, but rather of improved Sandinista defensive capabilities and internal contra problems.

"They [the Sandinistas] have put together intelligence with command and control and that is hampering what the contras can do," one Western intelligence source said. "It is also not very promising to see the contras in terms of military development."

Part of the intelligence work of the Sandinistas has involved penetrating the contra ranks with infiltrators and intercepting practically all of the rebel radio communications, various sources said.

Calero admitted that these were serious problems. "Remember this is a civil war," he said, "and 30 to 40 percent of our forces have been connected with the Sandinistas. We are open to defection, and some of these are infiltrators."

He also said that the FDN command was aware that their radio communications were compromised, but that they were in the process of obtaining new equipment that he hoped would eliminate this problem.

Although Calero admitted U.S. aid brought with it new bureaucratic problems for the rebels, he denied Sandinista claims that this had slowed contra procurement. He said that after some logistical problems a few months ago, shipments had returned to normal. Honduras, which despite official denials allows the contras to operate from its territory, has blocked some recent supply shipments.

"At one point it (shipment) was very slow," Calero said, "but now we have established the flow, the channels have improved."